

The Role and Reality of the University in the Middle East

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Ninety-three years ago, on a cold November morning in 1914, a small group of gentlemen gathered in a Madison Avenue office in New York City. The newspaper headlines that morning focused on the war in Europe, the Great War between the Allies and Germany. But the thoughts and the conversation of that small group that gathered in New York City were not so much on the war in Europe as they were on what they were planning to do regarding the creation of a new American-style university in the heart of downtown Cairo.

This small group of visionaries who dared dream of an American university in Cairo were making history back then. Next summer we will be opening the gates of our newly designed, 260 acre state-of-the-art campus—a City of Learning in the heart of New Cairo—we will be making history again.

We will begin this century as we began the last, by providing a high quality American-style education to a new generation of Egyptians and preparing them to meet the challenges and opportunities of the new century.

Since the early beginnings of the American University in Cairo (AUC), the political dynamic in the region and of the global economy have certainly changed; but the rationale for a liberal arts institution dedicated to educating successive generations of students in the Middle East continues today to be as strong as it was in 1914.

AUC's founders felt strongly that education should not be geared to passing a specific examination, or entering the government bureaucracy, or pursuing a narrow professional specialization. Instead, they felt education should provide a solid educational platform for advanced study in a variety of fields. It should equip students to succeed in whatever career or profession they choose.

Having said that, anyone familiar with the complex social and political dynamics in the Middle East today, as each of you are, is very well aware of the competing forces at work in the region in the post-9/11 world post-Iraq.

What is not in dispute is the power of education to be a positive agent for social and economic progress in a region that desperately needs well-educated leaders, globally competitive workers, and informed, engaged citizens.

H. G. Wells once said: "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." Today, those words are haunting. But perhaps they are a necessary call to action.

It is really up to us—all of us—to ensure that education wins that race, to teach the value of reason, to open minds to different cultures and different ideas, and to lift the hearts and spirits of the next generation by giving them a chance to compete in the global economy and the chance to build strong, healthy societies.

Those of us who are involved in higher education know that the Arab world today stands at a critical crossroads. If we can educate and train the new generation of young Arab leaders, the future outlook for the region can be bright. On the other hand, if we fail to meet this critical challenge, young people's hopes will be dimmed, their aspirations frustrated. And their minds increasingly closed to the world around them.

As educators on the ground in the Middle East, our task is to find a way to bridge the knowledge, technology and cultural gaps that have impeded the region's economic development and social progress. Closing these gaps requires a massive effort to bring the newest of the new—the most modern and advanced digital, state-of-the-art technologies and educational tools—to the oldest of the old—a culture and people living in the shadow of the Pyramids where, as Napoleon observed, "From the summit of these monuments, 40 centuries of history look upon you." It is a daunting task indeed; but a necessary one.

Those of us familiar with AUC know the role that it has played historically, the results it has achieved, the esteem in which it is held in Egyptian society, and also the pride and passion alumni and staff feel for the university. For those and many more reasons, we know what a positive force for change universities can be. Strong academic institutions like AUC can be the places where people and ideas come together to form the cornerstones of a prosperous, healthy and equitable society.

Put simply; the critical challenge we face is to help develop the intellectual power and human capital, of the next generation, both here and in the Middle East, to provide the foundations of scholarship, entrepreneurship, leadership, and civil society.

At AUC, the race that H. G. Wells was referring to began in New York 93 years ago at that first meeting of the AUC Board of Trustees. But, interestingly, the group assembled that morning did not call themselves "Trustees." They referred to themselves as "the Stewardship Group," a concept which captures the essence of AUC's public service mission. That mission is as relevant today as it was in 1914.

Let me illustrate the challenge facing higher education in the Arab world today with just a few statistics.

Since 2003, the United Nations has issued a series of reports that document the severe knowledge gaps, gender inequalities and political challenges facing the Arab world today. These Arab Human Development Reports have helped to shine an international spotlight on a part of the world where 65 million adults are illiterate, two-thirds of whom are women; where education, in many villages, is virtually non-existent; where the digital realities of the global economy are often an anachronism if not a dream—with only 18 computers for every 1,000 people compared to more than 400 per 1,000 in high-income nations.

Its a part of the world where 80 million young adults are expected to enter the labor pool in the next ten years; 80 million who will need the skills to compete in a knowledge-driven, globalized economy.

The economic statistics in Egypt alone are quite sobering. There is a labor force of 21 million people—10 percent of whom are unemployed. According to *The Economist*, the government is hoping that “strong economic growth [will] raise the living standards and thereby undercut the appeal of radical Islam,” focusing on developing the private sector and deepening financial markets in order to achieve economic progress.

The answer to this complex set of challenges is not in skill-training alone. That’s important, but it’s not sufficient. The answer really lies in educating citizens and building future leaders. This is the purpose of a liberal education. As Dr. Richard Levin, the President of Yale, said a few years ago, the purpose of liberal education is “to develop the capacity for independent thought rather than to acquire specific or useful knowledge.” He also echoes a view that has been frequently cited by many of us at AUC who argue that “liberal education is not intended to teach you *what* to think but *how* to think.”

In the Middle East context, the greatest contribution that universities can make is to teach the next generation how to think; how to analyze complex problems, understand and evaluate different points of view, and how to reach independent judgments and conclusions. These are the essential skills that we must give to our students if we are to have any hope of winning the race against catastrophe and of changing those sobering numbers for the better.

So “stewardship” is exactly the term that comes to the role of the university in developing and handling the human talent entrusted to us. That’s our role as educators. That is who we are and what we must continue to do—and do well—if we are to make a difference.

But a good liberal arts education does not just cultivate habits of the mind; it also nurtures habits of the heart. That is why a commitment to community outreach and public service has been a key part of AUC’s mission right from the very beginning.

Mahatma Gandhi once said: “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” I believe that statement to be profoundly true. Let me just give you one example of a young AUC graduate who, in many ways, represents the best of who we are and what we hope to see our young graduates become.

Raghda El Ebrashi graduated from AUC Cairo in 2004. She came to the University with a passion for community service. That started when she was sixteen years old, working as a volunteer in an earthquake zone in Cairo.

In an interview about her experience, Raghda said she met a twelve year old boy who was “uneducated, addicted to drugs, and without parents.”

Over time, she got to know him and realized that despite the problems he faced, he was an extremely talented writer. She worked with him to help turn his life around, stuck with him, and mentored him. She did not give up, and four years after they met, his first story was published. She said it was an event that “transformed him completely.”

She said in the interview, “He touched me deeply. Working with him is one thing in my life I will never forget. It was the first time I ever changed the life of another person.” I think all of us would agree that in some respects that experience transformed her as much as it transformed him.

A year after she met that young man, Raghda came to AUC. It did not take long for her to found a community service club she named Alashanek Ya Balady—which means For My Country. She wanted this club to instill a sense of nationalistic pride to counteract the apathy she often saw among young Egyptians of her generation.

She said, “Many people see the problems in our country—the pollution, the ignorance, the poverty—and they want to go to Europe and the United States to escape.” She believed it was not only the poor people who were the victims of this set of challenges, but that there was a great for those who have the resources to make a difference and contribute to the improvement of their communities.

Other clubs on campus promoted short-term solutions to long-term problems, distributing food, clothes, blankets, and essential supplies. But the club that Raghda founded had a different focus, it was on development, not charity. And she concentrated her efforts in Ain El Sira, one of the most poverty-stricken districts in Cairo and ultimately established an ambitious, multi-faceted program eradicating illiteracy; teaching language, computer, and technical skills; setting up income generating projects; and creating youth development programs. She connected her on-campus NGO with student organizations at other Egyptian universities— Ain Shams, Cairo and Alexandria universities.

Today Alashanek Ya Balady is a nationally recognized NGO, and Raghda recently received the “35 Under 35” award from *World Business* magazine and the Shell Corporation, naming her one of 35 women under the age of 35 who are leading international business and social entrepreneurs.

There is no greater gift than the gift Raghda has given. It is the gift of hope, and it exemplifies the stewardship spirit and mission of our university and of the positive change it can make in the lives of individuals, communities and nations.

One of the other changes I think we would all wish to see is a broad based movement toward intellectual tolerance and the free exchange of ideas everywhere, certainly in academic settings, whether here in the U.S or the Middle East.

Last month, in New York, the president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stood at a podium at Columbia University; and the university was severely criticized for inviting him to come and speak there. Last year, at AUC, the Muslim Brotherhood spoke on our campus, the first time anyone from the Brotherhood was allowed to speak publicly in such a forum in Egypt; and we were severely criticized as well.

I mention this because these events are not about the expression of either Columbia’s or AUC’s political views. They are not an indication of agreement or disagreement with any one political perspective. They are part and parcel of a free and open academic environment that allows all sides to come together, express divergent views, express them passionately, freely, without reservation, judgment, or fear of punishment.

We will never all agree. But neither should we allow fear to engage those with whom we disagree. Without debate, without diametrically opposing views being aired openly and publicly in academic settings, there is no hope for diffusing the tensions that separate people. There can be no hope of mutual understanding, nor movement toward compromise. And without understanding and compromise, the moderate center cannot hold.

As an American-style university in Cairo, we are well aware of the political environment in which we operate and how some might perceive or misperceive our motives as an American institution.

But our position, publicly and privately, is very clear: AUC is not now and has never been a voice for U.S. foreign policy or the American government in Egypt. We are an independent academic institution, an educational institution, a learning community that welcomes all views, all ideas and which does not have a political agenda or a foreign policy of its own.

Our commitment to academic freedom and integrity is critical to the fulfillment of our fundamental educational mission. We can and we should engage the political debate at institutions like Columbia and AUC, but what we can never do is allow politics to compromise the larger academic purposes of our institutions.

The perils and pitfalls are clear to all of us, certainly to all of us who are following the state of the Middle East and becoming increasingly distressed about the situation there, but we also have to view this as an opportunity for fostering increased tolerance and encouraging and facilitating the free exchange of ideas.

Given the depressing state of affairs in the Middle East today, Americans might well ask ourselves: Why now; why Egypt; why institutions like AUC?

The answer is quite simple: To keep the clock moving inexorably forward in this tense and difficult post-911 world. To educate a new generation of skilled leaders who have a global perspective and a profound belief in cross-cultural understanding. Some might choose, in foreign policy parlance, to call that “soft power.” I prefer to call it common sense.

But how do we do it? How do we keep the clock moving forward as others are doing everything in their power to turn it back?

First, we teach young men and women to communicate effectively, think critically, and exercise independent judgment.

We give them the technological skills and cultural literacy so they can compete at any level in any job in any setting in any nation in the world.

We offer them a range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities to develop leadership skills and build character.

We get them involved in student government organizations, in the Model UN, the Model Arab League, in the Model Egyptian Parliament, in athletic programs, and community service clubs.

We teach them that service to the community and civic engagement is a noble cause.

We let them know that public service is not just part of their educational experience but is really embedded in our DNA as an institution, from the community service programs that we sponsor, continuing education and outreach efforts that we host, student service clubs, a new Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement, there is a wide range of activities at AUC.



We let them know that if they engage in civic life as they serve their community they really can make a difference; they truly can “be the change [they] wish to see in the world.”

By definition, educators are optimists. If you didn’t believe the world could be a better place, why would you bother to educate the next generation? So as the leader of an American university in the heart of the Middle East, I confess to being an inveterate optimist. When I look at the faces of the young men and women on our campus, all of them eager to learn; committed to doing more and doing better for themselves, for their families, and for Egypt, it gives me hope.

When I look at young graduates like Raghda, I see a future in which radicalism is trumped by education and the prosperity that comes with it. A future in which tolerance and reason prevail, progress is sustained through responsible growth and development, and the moderate center holds.

I also hope to see all of you accepting our open invitation to come visit a new world class university in New Cairo—an internationally distinguished City of Learning with outstanding facilities, a highly respected international faculty, and very accomplished alumni—people with passion, vision and commitment serving in the senior leadership ranks of major corporations, government ministries, international agencies, non-governmental organizations and leading universities around the world.

I see a new generation of graduates unlocking the region’s potential, bridging the development gap and, one day, in the not too distant future, fulfilling the stewardship mission envisioned by that small group of dedicated dreamers more than 90 years ago.

And when I think of what they can achieve, I see the face of Raghda El Ebrashi and think of the power of one person to “be the change we wish to see in the world.”

Thank you very much.

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